

A Criticism of the Central Board Plan for Ohio Institutions



— By —

RUTHERFORD H. PLATT

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(From The Columbus Dispatch of Feb, 21, 1915)

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To The Editor of The Dispatch :

Sir: The plan of a central board to administer the State institutions of Ohio, adopted four years ago and inaugurated by Governor Harmon, is receiving commendation in newspaper paragraphs. Any plan works well with the right men to work it, and Governor Harmon selected men of the right sort for the original board. The advantage of purchasing supplies and equipment for all the institutions through one purchasing agency is obvious; a considerable saving by that method could be confidently predicted. In their material needs the 20 State institutions are very much alike; questions touching lands, buildings, equipment and supplies are governed by the same practical considerations, whether they concern a penitentiary, an institution for feeble minded, a soldiers' home, a girls' industrial school, a boys' industrial school, a hospital for the insane, a reformatory, a hospital for epileptics, a hospital for the tuberculous, a school for the deaf or a school for the blind.

On the other hand, these institutions differ radically and absolutely in the purpose they are severally designed to serve; aside from their material needs, the institutions named have nothing in common; their very names indicate how widely they differ; their respective problems are entirely different; the special knowledge

or science which must be availed of to deal intelligently with these problems is different. The plain requirement of the work for which these 20 great institutions were created and exist is specialization for each—not combination or attempted combination of their unrelated matters.

The superintendents and professional heads of the institutions are, of course, specialists; under the former system of administration members of the local boards very generally acquired information pertinent to the special work of their respective institutions; many of them became qualified experts, perfectly competent to criticise and judge the methods and work. No one would claim that the local boards were in all respects above criticism; they sometimes took their responsibilities rather lightly; but it was not all cakes and ale, or, as an esteemed editor recalls it, "roast beef and mince pie;" the members were generally able, active and influential men; and, for the most part, they were men who loyally and conscientiously applied themselves and their abilities to any responsibilities they undertook. I heard Governor Foster say (and he knew whereof he spoke) that no man in Ohio would refuse to serve the State in the unpaid trusteeships of the State institutions. Governor Foster himself served devotedly for years as a member of the Toledo State Hospital Board, after he had been Governor and had served as Secretary of the Treasury in President Harrison's cabinet.

The members of the local boards coming to their meetings once a month or oftener put the institution in touch with the outside world; they gained something in their knowledge of the State work, and that work gained something from their interest and attention; they were, in general, a strong helpful influence and materially helped to keep alive the ardor, zeal and professional ambition of the superintendent and his assistants; they carried with them into the outside community some first-hand information about the institution of which there is unfortunately a woeful lack.

For many years before they were abolished the boards were, for the most part, free from partisan political influences.

The administration of the business affairs of the twenty institutions by a central board, with headquarters at Columbus, regarded frankly and simply as a business proposition, will justify itself as long as competent men are appointed to the board and as long as it continues uncontaminated by political influences. But the assumption that any such central agency can, in addition to the business affairs and responsibilities, take up in like manner and successfully deal with the manifold, human, scientific and professional problems of these institutions ignores the magnitude and difficulties of such an undertaking. Such an idea does not commend itself.

The institutions were organized and running smoothly when the board of administration took them over; few changes have been made; things were and are

probably still going on fairly well; but when the local boards dropped out this meant more responsibility for the executive heads of the institutions; their daily problems are more than ever in their own hands; from the superintendent's standpoint this is no objection to the change—quite the reverse; but to leave him more and more to go his own gait is not good for him nor his work. The greatest danger the institutions are subject to is one that is common to many hopeful undertakings—the dry rot of routine; as that sets in, the scientific and progressive spirit goes out. There is an easy-going tendency to make of an institution designed for constructive professional work a place of mere custodial care—a sort of glorified poorhouse; well ordered grounds and buildings—sanitary and comfortable conditions become the chief subject for pride; professional effort is relaxed; when this becomes the prevailing condition the institution is like a business enterprise which has lost its earning power, it is on the way to insolvency and failure.

Everyone who gives the matter any consideration will concede that the professional, human side of the work is the really important thing; the purpose for which the institution exists is not to save money, but to serve some human need; the degree in which that human need is being served is the measure of success; honesty and efficiency on the business side are essential, but a favorable financial showing—a lowered per capita cost—is no index of success.

There have been instances of admirable business

management and well ordered material conditions with rank failure in the work whose successful doing alone could justify the existence of the institution; and, when this is so, the institution, with all its fair appearance, is a positive evil. This will be generally conceded, but if space permitted it ought to be enlarged upon and emphasized, for it is not given due effect. The facts of the business side are easily grasped and understood; that side alone receives attention from the man on the street—it is commonly made the criterion and the sole criterion of success—when, in fact, it is no criterion at all—it is a mere means to the real end.

The current commendation of the central board plan rests entirely on a consideration of the business side of the work.

It is already proven that this central board plan has at least one of the common and most vicious characteristics of the political board; faithful service gives no assurance of continued tenure of office; of Governor Harmon's four appointees the first man out was promptly required to walk the plank; after nearly two years of devoted and zealous service, and after acquiring valuable knowledge of the duties, he was superseded by a new appointee. It is reasonable to expect that precedent to be regularly followed; each succeeding governor will have "deserving" friends of his own for all the \$5000 appointments that fall to his hand.

My point of view is that of an outsider; after serving twelve years on the Board of State Charities, I re-

signed from that board two years ago, and have not since then been connected with the State Institutions. I speak openly. The central board seems to be in favor just now; it has probably come to stay for some time; possibly I am the only remaining friend of the separate board system; but, in my humble opinion, the separate unpaid boards for Ohio's twenty or more institutions of different kinds, scattered through the state, were right in theory; their defects were not radical and did not weigh against their advantages; one principal fault was their being burdened with certain business details—contracting for supplies and approving bills—which could be better performed by another agency and which consumed time of the board that might be better spent on other matters. That fault can be remedied, and at the same time the one important feature of the central administration plan preserved by appointing a State purchasing agent with defined powers and duties. Furthermore, with all respect and humble apologies to the present members of the board and their admirable organization, this central board plan seems to me fraught with dangerous possibilities, and to bear the seeds of infinite trouble and regret—if the plan holds, evil days are sure to come sooner or later.

Very respectfully,

R. H. PLATT.

February 20, 1915.

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